

## Excerpts in a Time of Untruth, or Voltaire's Practice of Excerpting and the Rehabilitation of Justice

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**Summary:** In the history of scholarly practice, Voltaire stands out among eighteenth-century authors for his critical attitude towards erudite reading habits. His contempt for the “compileurs” is a radical expression of the Enlightenment desire to write free of the traditions and burdens of the past. His famous interventions in Ancien Régime court cases are also emblematic of the action-oriented philosophy of the period. This article investigates the role played in the case of the Chevalier de La Barre by documents that Voltaire called “excerpts.” The case was the last Voltaire was involved in and concerned a young man, charged with blasphemy, who was eventually beheaded and burnt in 1766, Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif* (1764) nailed to his torso. With reference to two texts in particular—*Relation de la mort du chevalier de La Barre* (1766) and *Le Cri du sang innocent* (1775)—I focus on Voltaire's practice of excerpting from the court transcripts and on their specific role in his fight for the rehabilitation of the victims.

**Keywords:** Voltaire, Justice, Excerpts, Enlightenment, “Compileurs”, Scholarly practice, La Barre case

Even in his lifetime, Voltaire's reputation for careless reading habits was well-established among his detractors. One of these—the Abbé Claude-Adrien Nonnotte—wrote two volumes entitled *Les Erreurs de Voltaire* (1762), in which he lists the inaccuracies of the famous author of the Enlightenment. Nonnotte attributes Voltaire's mistakes to his strong bias against the Catholic Church, but is even more critical of his lack of erudition, noting reprovingly: “cet auteur est [...] sans érudition véritable.”<sup>1</sup> This peremptory judgement persists to this day, even among the author's most loyal advocates. In Voltaire's defence, it can be argued that he himself never claimed to be an “érudit,” nor did he ever boast of a coherent system of collating, either in the form of an “extract book” or that of any kind of

<sup>1</sup> Nonnotte 1762, vol. 1, on 5.

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reading file. He also had a barely concealed contempt for his learned colleagues, whom he labelled “les compilateurs” and ridiculed for their pedantry, devoutness and sterility. He used the term to refer derisively to various types of scholar: those who really did publish “compilations” of texts, but also, more generally, anyone who produced long volumes that merely regurgitated traditional models.<sup>2</sup> A satirical poem mocks the monotonous habits of one such scholar: “il compilait, compilait, compilait.”<sup>3</sup> Voltaire seems to set the habit of excerpting in direct opposition to the faculty of reason, as if reproducing texts could only lead to overcrowding and paralyse the ability to think accurately. A few years later, in the entry “BIBLIOTHÈQUE” he goes on to distinguish between real authors and those “qui ne sont que compilateurs, imitateurs, commentateurs, éplucheurs de phrases, critiques à la petite semaine [...]”;<sup>4</sup> in the long perspective of the history of this scholarly practice, Voltaire stresses his own modernity and break with tradition. His sharp criticism articulates the Enlightenment ambition of thinking and writing independently. This attitude in particular distinguishes his oeuvre from that of other well-known eighteenth-century authors.<sup>5</sup>

Voltaire's publications extend over half a century—his first tragedy *Cedipe* dates back to 1718; his last tragedy *Irène* premiered a few months before his death, in 1778. During the second part of his long life, as his fight against intolerance and superstition gained momentum, Voltaire intervened in several legal cases of the Ancien Régime. His most famous intervention concerned the protestant Jean Calas who was mistakenly put to death in Toulouse on grounds of religious prejudice. By writing letters, pamphlets and essays, Voltaire succeeded in obtaining the posthumous rehabilitation of Jean Calas and moral and financial compensation for his family. Encouraged by his extraordinary success in mobilising public opinion, he went on to spend the last twenty years of his life fighting legal cases.<sup>6</sup> The last of these was the “Affaire La Barre,” a case named after the defendant, the Chevalier de La Barre, a young man accused of blasphemy and immoral conduct in a small town in Picardie in northern France, and sentenced to torture and execution in the summer of 1765.

In this article I shall examine the role played by excerpts in Voltaire's last fight against the judiciary of the Ancien Régime, as he defended victims of injustice or attempted to rehabilitate their memory. These excerpts were products of Voltaire's reading; he himself referred to them as “extraits,” “précis,” “relations” or “résumés.” Despite his vociferous contempt for compilations and his image of himself as a modern author, he often resorted to the practice of excerpting in his fight for justice, making summaries of criminal proceedings, writing verbatim reports

<sup>2</sup> In his *Remarques sur l'histoire* (1741) he attacks ancient historian Charles Rollin: “Si on voulait faire usage de sa raison au lieu de sa mémoire, et examiner plus que transcrire, on ne multiplierait pas à l'infini les livres et les erreurs; il faudrait n'écrire que des choses neuves et vraies. Ce qui manque d'ordinaire à ceux qui compilent l'histoire, c'est l'esprit philosophique.” Voltaire 1957, on 43. On the historiographical debates in the Enlightenment, see Senardens 2003, on 187–226 (Chap. “Le conflit historiographique entre l'érudition et la philosophie”).

<sup>3</sup> Voltaire 2015, on 95.

<sup>4</sup> Voltaire 2008, on 360.

<sup>5</sup> For e.g. Montesquieu, see Dornier 2008. See also d'Iorio and Ferrer 2001.

<sup>6</sup> See Trousson 1994.

of legal dossiers and taking marginal notes. But Voltaire's use of excerpts shows an untypical approach to the practice. In order to understand what he does differently, it makes sense to start by looking at his reading habits.

### 1. Mixing the Plum Pudding

There can be no doubt that Voltaire was a tireless and erudite reader. A large but little-known part of his oeuvre consists of commentaries based on close readings of the works of ancient and modern authors from Sophocles to Newton, Bayle, Pascal, Montesquieu, etc. In some of these, such as his notes on the Bible—*La Bible enfin expliquée*—or his three-volume critique of Pierre Corneille's plays—*Commentaires sur Corneille*—his readings consist of precise line-by-line commentaries. Many of his late works, such as the *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif* or the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie par des amateurs*, take the form of dictionaries with entries made up of synopses and quotations. This must have involved processing a huge corpus of texts. But even in these more erudite works, Voltaire had a cheerful and humorous attitude to his own creativity. A reference in one of his letters to a “plum-pudding”<sup>7</sup>—a number of different ingredients from various provenances, mixed up to produce a rich and tasty dessert—hardly suggests systematic working methods, and Christiane Mervaud, who edited Voltaire's work for the standard edition of The Voltaire Foundation, has pointed out the aptness of the metaphor for describing his quotation practice. Going further still, she calls the *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif* an “œuvre cannibale”<sup>8</sup> and compares its author's reading practice to that of a looter. While reading, Voltaire disrupts, distorts and helps himself to the work of others to create something new; according to Mervaud, his writing technique resembles an “art de la mosaïque.”<sup>9</sup> In her introduction to the same work, she quotes Michel de Montaigne's famous description of the reader as a bee, going from flower to flower, gathering nectar to produce honey which is entirely his own: “Les abeilles pillotent deçà delà les fleurs, mais en font après leur miel, qui est tout leur; ce n'est plus thym ni marjolaine.”<sup>10</sup> Voltaire the reader has more in common with this happy bee than with a dreary scholar, shut away in the gloom of his study, keeping systematic notes.

Voltaire's dismissal of the *ars excerpendi* and his sarcasm about submissive phrasemongers has had an influence on the reception of his work. His own practice as a “reading” writer remains obscure, and he himself seems to have contributed to the obfuscation by concealing the intermediary steps, apparently reluctant to leave his readers with a clear idea of his working methods, or to bequeath orderly archives to posterity. The many volumes of *Correspondence and Related Documents* (1968–1977) published by the Voltaire Foundation are an essential source for anyone wanting a closer understanding of Voltaire's responses to what he read; his

<sup>7</sup> “Je suis assez de l'avis d'un Anglais qui disait que toutes les origines, tous les droits, tous les établissements, ressemblent au *plum-pudding*; le premier n'y mit que de la farine, un second y ajouta des œufs, un troisième du sucre, un quatrième des raisins, et ainsi se forma le *plum-pudding*.” Voltaire to M. de la Chalotais, 11 juillet 1762 (D10580), in Voltaire 1968–1977 (1973), vol. 109, on 95.

<sup>8</sup> Mervaud 1994a, on 95.

<sup>9</sup> Mervaud 1994a, on 86. See also Ferret et al. 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, I, XXVI, cited in Mervaud 1994a, on 64.

letters were clearly a place of gestation for his thinking and writing. But they do not offer a straightforward key to his readers. Confronted with Voltaire's disparate, dense and chaotic archive, André Magnan deemed it unpublishable—"Voltaire inéditable" was the title he gave to a conference on the subject.<sup>11</sup> The fragmentation of the archives after Voltaire's death in 1778 has been a further hindrance to researchers keen to understand his writing process. A brief reminder: Voltaire spent most of his life and did most of his writing in exile, far from Paris. After his death, the most important editions of his work were published outside France. Together with the manuscripts of his library, 6,814 volumes were sold to Catherine II in Petersburg, where they remain to this day in the holdings of the Russian National Library. But not all Voltaire's books and manuscripts went to Russia.<sup>12</sup> Other documents, collected and bought by Theodore Besterman after World War II, are located today in the Institut et Musée Voltaire (IMV) in Geneva and the Voltaire Foundation in Oxford. A smaller part of his collection is also in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris. The volumes in Russia, which constitute the bulk of his heritage, did not receive much attention during the nineteenth century. Czar Nicholas I, considering Voltaire the gravedigger of the absolute monarchy, even closed the library to visitors. It was only in the twentieth century that efforts were begun to inventory and describe this material. In 1968 two volumes of *Notebooks* were published in the *Œuvres Complètes* of the Oxford Edition,<sup>13</sup> bringing together heterogeneous texts in Voltaire's hand or that of one or other of his secretaries: travel notes, anecdotes, thoughts, quotations, translations and a few reading excerpts and preparatory workbooks, many fragmentary, dating back to the beginning of his career. Over the course of his life, as he became more sedentary, Voltaire increasingly omitted the intermediary steps and quoted directly from the annotations he had made in his books.

The marginal notes in his books provide further material for investigation. Voltaire's library was not that of a bibliophile and collector of precious first editions, but a set of work tools. More than a third of his books contain a variety of verbal and non-verbal textual marks. The first volumes, a Berlin-Leningrad cooperation, were printed by the Akademie-Verlag in the GDR in 1979.<sup>14</sup> The Voltaire Foundation's publication of the *Corpus des notes marginales* began in 2004, in cooperation with the National Library of Russia. The tenth volume was published this year.<sup>15</sup> Voltaire underlined, wrote comments in the margins and very often entered into a critical dialogue with the authors he read. Ironic objections and even outright insults are not uncommon in his annotations.<sup>16</sup> This rich material has recently been explored and classified by Gillian Pink in her book, *Voltaire à l'ouvrage*.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Magnan 2015.

<sup>12</sup> See Cronk 2011, on 768.

<sup>13</sup> Voltaire 1968.

<sup>14</sup> Voltaire 1979–1995.

<sup>15</sup> Voltaire 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Mervaud 2010, on 755–775.

<sup>17</sup> Pink 2018.

## 2. Excerpting in a Time of Fear

So what brought Voltaire to resort to the use of excerpts in the “Affaire La Barre”? In the summer of 1765, in the little town of Abbeville in Picardie in northern France, three young men, François-Jean Lefebvre, chevalier de La Barre, Gaillard d’Etallonde and Charles Moïsnel, aged respectively seventeen, nineteen and twenty-two, were accused of sacrilege, blasphemy and irreligion. A crucifix had been damaged on a bridge leading to Abbeville. The three young men had been observed failing to doff their hats as a religious procession passed by earlier in the summer. They had been heard singing libertine songs with pornographic allusions to the Virgin Mary. These accusations were aggravated by the discovery of allegedly shocking and libertine books in La Barre’s room, among them, Voltaire’s *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif*, printed anonymously in Geneva in 1764.<sup>18</sup> These unrelated offences led to the death penalty for La Barre and d’Etallonde. The latter managed to escape to Prussia where—thanks to Voltaire’s intervention—Frederick the Great granted him asylum, so La Barre had to face the sentence alone: despite the intervention of a famous lawyer, the Parliament of Paris rejected his appeal, and the king refused to consider his request for clemency. On 1 July 1766, La Barre was tortured and beheaded.<sup>19</sup> His body was burnt on a pyre together with Voltaire’s *Dictionnaire*.

Voltaire heard about the case in his retreat at Ferney, near Geneva, when the first accusations were made, and his correspondence attests to his acute interest in the young men’s fate.<sup>20</sup> At first, he was hopeful that the death sentence would be commuted to a lesser sentence; later, when he learned that the execution had taken place, he was horrified.<sup>21</sup> In a letter to a friend, he expressed his horror at the strange combination of frivolity and cruelty he observed in the French.

L’atrocité de cette aventure me saisit d’horreur et de colère. [...] Et c’est là ce peuple si doux, si léger, et si gai! Arlequins anthropophages, je ne veux plus entendre parler de vous. Courez du bucher au bal, et de la Grève à l’Opéra-Comique; rouer Calas, pendez Sirven, brûler cinq pauvres jeunes gens [...]. Je ne veux pas respirer le même air que vous.<sup>22</sup>

Beside dismay at French “légèreté,” the letters Voltaire wrote following the execution show genuine fear. After the burning and symbolic execution of his *Dictionnaire* alongside the convicted man, he felt indirectly targeted. He was also well

<sup>18</sup> The *Dictionnaire philosophique* was published several times under changing titles and with ever longer entries. In the 1769 edition entitled *La Raison par l’Alphabet*, Voltaire includes an article on “TORTURE” in which he relates La Barre’s ordeal. The prosecution mentioned this scandalous book which was later put on the Vatican’s *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*.

<sup>19</sup> On the political context of the judgement and the efforts of lawyers to come to the rescue of La Barre, see Voltaire 2008b, on 493–501.

<sup>20</sup> Voltaire’s correspondence testifies to his concern in the young men’s fate. See, for instance, his letters to d’Alembert, Damilaville, d’Argenson, Diderot and others in the months of July, August and September 1766 in Voltaire 1968–1977 (1973), vol. 114, on 307 sq.

<sup>21</sup> Voltaire 2008b, on 502. As Mervaud 2017, on 77 has shown, this “affaire” was to haunt him for the rest of his life.

<sup>22</sup> Voltaire to Charles d’Argental, 16 July 1766 (D 13420), in Voltaire 1968–1977 (1973), vol. 114, on 316–317.

aware that his name and writings had been mentioned at the trial as the inspiration for the young provincials' ill conduct.<sup>23</sup> Gabriel Cramer, Voltaire's Genevan publisher, captured the philosopher's ambivalent state of mind while he was treating his ailments "aux eaux de Rolle" near Geneva:

Quand je vois le patriarche, je ne cesse de lui dire, & quand je ne le vois pas je ne cesse de lui écrire, qu'il n'a aucune autre chose à faire que de jouir de son bien-être, & de laisser le monde tel qu'il est ; mais c'est battre l'eau avec un bâton, *il faut qu'il se mêle de tout & passe sa vie à être téméraire & à mourir de peur.*<sup>24</sup>

At this time, Voltaire had been living far from Paris for more than thirty years, enjoying a degree of independence away from the political court and the parliaments. He stood for the Enlightenment fight for truth and most of his famous texts were published under pseudonyms and on the list of censored books.<sup>25</sup> In the months following the execution of La Barre, Voltaire lived in real fear.<sup>26</sup> He even planned to leave French territory altogether and establish a community of exiled philosophers on Prussian territory in Cleve, a town in northern Westphalia. He asked Diderot to join him and help him to create a "chair of Truth" to teach future generations:

Vous devriez bien venir dans un pays où vous auriez la liberté entière non seulement d'imprimer ce que vous voudriez, mais de prêcher hautement contre les superstitions aussi infâmes que sanguinaires. Vous n'y seriez pas seul, vous auriez des compagnons et des disciplines. Vous pourriez y établir une chaire qui serait une *chaire de vérité*.<sup>27</sup>

Despite his concerns about his own security,<sup>28</sup> however, Voltaire fully endorsed La Barre's defence. His *Correspondence* shows his permanent fear of dying before achieving a retrial.<sup>29</sup> He begs his friends and fellow philosophers to overcome their differences and work together. The convicted might have been silly young men, but they were his readers.

<sup>23</sup> "Il n'ignore pas que le conseiller Denis-Louis Pasquier a dit en plein parlement que les jeunes gens d'Abbeville avaient puisé leur impiété dans l'école et dans les ouvrages des philosophes modernes." Voltaire 2008b, on 502.

<sup>24</sup> Gabriel Cramer to Johann Rudolf Sinner, 5 September 1766 (D 13538), in Voltaire 1968–1977 (1973), vol. 114, on 421.

<sup>25</sup> On Voltaire's strategies for dealing with censorship, see Senarclens 2019.

<sup>26</sup> See Speranskaja 2017, on 192: "C'est donc à tort que Théodore Tronchin proclamait que Voltaire était fou de vouloir quitter la France en août 1766. Selon une déclaration royale du 16 avril 1757, les auteurs des écrits *tendant à attaquer la religion, à émouvoir les esprits* encourageaient la peine de mort."

<sup>27</sup> Voltaire to Diderot, 23 July 1766 (D13442), in Voltaire 1968–1977 (1973), vol. 114, on 337 (emphasis added). See also Marc Hersant on the exchange between Voltaire and Diderot on La Barre: "Ils interprétaient tous deux l'affaire du chevalier de la Barre comme une déclaration de guerre du pouvoir aux Lumières, et la panique le disputa dans leur cœur à la colère, car ils se sentaient véritablement en danger." Hersant 2017, on 13.

<sup>28</sup> See Speranskaja 2017, on 192.

<sup>29</sup> Voltaire entrusts Condorcet to continue the fight after his death. See Voltaire 2014, on 226–227.

### 3. Getting the Facts Straight

In the “affaire Calas,” Voltaire fought a miscarriage of justice in which the severity of the law was at stake—or, more precisely, the discrepancy between the offence and the punishment.<sup>30</sup> Voltaire’s correspondence of 1765–1766 attests to his sustained effort to obtain all available information on the case and coordinate the other parties involved, such as Diderot, Condorcet, Damilaville, Beccaria, Frederick of Prussia and a number of lawyers.<sup>31</sup> He urges correspondents in Paris, but also in Abbeville, to send him all available information on the indictment, and is especially interested in the information contained in a *Mémoire à consulter*<sup>32</sup> which was written by a group of lawyers following an appeal of the first-instance judgement. Without the official documents, Voltaire finds himself unable to write—or, as he puts it: “je sèche en attendant la consultation des avocats [...]”<sup>33</sup>

In addition to his letters, Voltaire wrote a number of texts on the case. One of these was the *Relation de la mort du chevalier de La Barre*, a report on the circumstances surrounding La Barre’s execution.<sup>34</sup> In the 1769 edition of his *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif*, Voltaire included a new article on “TORTURE,” based entirely on the case of the Chevalier de La Barre; he also focused on the subject in several entries of his *Questions sur l’Encyclopédie par des amateurs* (1770–1772).<sup>35</sup> Another text, *Prix de la justice et de l’humanité* (1777), describes the French justice system from the point of view of a Swiss protestant traveller in France, but the last important text Voltaire wrote on the case was *Le Cri du sang innocent*, 1775, a letter addressed to the King of France—Louis XVI—and signed by La Barre’s co-accused who had escaped to Prussia.

The recent 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration of the Chevalier’s execution saw a number of conferences and publications on Voltaire’s primary sources. The manuscripts confirm his intense work on the legal documents relating to the trial.<sup>36</sup> Natalia Speranskaja,<sup>37</sup> curator of the Voltaire Library in St Petersburg, and John Iverson<sup>38</sup> have recently worked on the vast body of material which Voltaire received from his well-organised network of correspondents. It contains many traces of his reading: different kinds of annotation, dog-eared pages, marginalia, underlinings, crossings-out and other textual interventions. These documents not only demonstrate the significance of legal material for the various texts Voltaire

<sup>30</sup> Eric Wenzel—a historian of French law—confirmed that the proceedings were in compliance with Ancien Régime law. What was at issue was not the legality of the proceedings, but the legitimacy of the judiciary; Wenzel 2017.

<sup>31</sup> This strategy was extremely successful. See Walter 1982 and Géhanne-Gavoty 2017.

<sup>32</sup> The lawyer Linguet defended the convicted together with others and produced a *Mémoire à consulter et Consultation pour les sieurs Moynel, Dumesniel de Saveuse et Douville de Maillefeu, injustement impliqués dans l’affaire de la mutilation d’un crucifix, arrivées à Abbeville le 9 août 1765*.

<sup>33</sup> Voltaire to Damillaville, 25 July 1766 (D13449), in Voltaire 1968–1977, vol. 114, on 344–345.

<sup>34</sup> Voltaire 2008. The chapter five (“Des profanations”) of Voltaire’s *Commentaire sur le livre Des Délits et des peines* (1766) also mentions the case La Barre: Voltaire 2012.

<sup>35</sup> For instance, the articles BLASPHEME, IMPIE, SUPPLICE, JUSTICE. This late work of Voltaire comprises eight volumes of entries on eclectic topics, arranged in alphabetical order. See Mervaud 2018 and Mervaud 2017.

<sup>36</sup> See *Revue Voltaire* 2017. See also Habib et al. 2017.

<sup>37</sup> See Speranskaja 2017, on 181–295.

<sup>38</sup> Iverson 2017, on 103–123.



wrote in the hope of achieving a retrial; they are also evidence of the growing importance of the legal sources for his other writing between the two main texts on the La Barre case – the *Relation de la mort du chevalier de La Barre*, published in 1766 and *Le Cri du sang innocent*, published nine years later, in 1775. With each new attempt to intervene on behalf of the accused, Voltaire goes back to the documents, rereading, cross-checking, digging around.<sup>39</sup> As new information comes in, he modifies his arguments, taking into account the impartiality of some of his earlier informants and the politically biased nature of the “facts” they had given him.

#### 4. Excerpts and the Fight for Justice

The excerpts made by Voltaire in the context of the legal proceedings have a political function in his correspondence. Referred to as “extraits,” “précis,” “résumés” or “relations,” they consist of summaries of court proceedings, verbatim notes of the witness statements for the prosecution, extensive quotations of court speeches and chronological lists of facts. Voltaire scatters them throughout his letters to friends but also circulates them among important members of the judiciary. Sometimes he specifies that his name should not be mentioned;<sup>40</sup> at other times he distances himself from the excerpts he cites. In one letter, for instance, he refers to an extract containing a detailed account of La Barre’s behaviour during the trial as “l’extrait d’une lettre que je viens de recevoir.”<sup>41</sup> Elsewhere he qualifies another “extrait” in a way that allows him to maintain the fiction of the letter’s veracity, while distancing himself from its content: “étrange lettre que j’ai reçue d’un château près d’Abbeville.”<sup>42</sup> The accounts he quotes seem to have served as test balloons for his campaign in support of La Barre. They were widely distributed; some were even printed in major clandestine publications such as the *Mémoires secrets pour servir l’histoire de la République des Lettres en France* under titles like “petit extrait des dernières nouvelles d’Abbeville.”<sup>43</sup> This text has been attributed to Voltaire because of the courage it demonstrates in defending the cause of human justice: “ce cri de l’humanité qu’il fait entendre partout.”<sup>44</sup> It shows how successful he was at using his excerpts to mobilise public opinion.

All this scattered material was later integrated in the first posthumous “Œuvres Complètes”<sup>45</sup> edited by Condorcet and Beaumarchais, in Baden. The excerpts are now included in today’s reference edition, published in Oxford. Robert Grandroute, who has worked on the *Relation* and on *Le Cri*, included five such “extraits” in his editions. They act as “paratexts” or “thresholds”<sup>46</sup> to the main text and affect its reception.

<sup>39</sup> Iverson 2017, on 121.

<sup>40</sup> Grandroute who in his “Introduction” to the *Relation* lists various letters attesting to Voltaire’s strategy: Voltaire 2008b, on 505–506.

<sup>41</sup> Voltaire to Damillaville, 25 July 1766 (D13449), in Voltaire 1968–1977 (1973), vol. 114, on 344–345.

<sup>42</sup> Voltaire 2008b, on 506.

<sup>43</sup> Voltaire 2008b, on 506.

<sup>44</sup> Voltaire 2008b, on 506.

<sup>45</sup> *Appendice* in Voltaire 2008b, on 574–575.

<sup>46</sup> See Genette 1987.



The *Relation de la mort du chevalier de La Barre* opens with an apostrophe to the famous philosopher of law, Cesare Beccaria. Writing under the name of a recently deceased lawyer “Monsieur Cassen”, Voltaire addresses an open letter to Beccaria whose legal treatise *Dei Delletti e dei Pene* (1764) had recently been translated into French at Voltaire’s instigation by the Abbé Morellet: “Il semble, Monsieur, que toutes les fois qu’un génie bienfaisant cherche à rendre service au genre humain, un démon funeste s’élève aussitôt pour détruire l’ouvrage de la raison.”<sup>47</sup> This fictional letter sets out the facts that led to La Barre’s death, underlines the jealousies that caused him to die and analyses the role played by “monitions.” In the La Barre case, these “monitions” were issued by the Church to put pressure on the population of Abbeville to make witness statements that would incriminate La Barre. The fictional lawyer in Voltaire’s letter to Beccaria criticises them for being absurd and contradictory.<sup>48</sup> The *Relation de la mort du chevalier de La Barre* is entirely in the epistolary form.<sup>49</sup> It describes in detail the torture and execution of La Barre, but also reflects on the principles of justice and equity, and on the damage done to France’s reputation by such a barbaric trial.

The excerpts published in the appendix to the *Relation* are closely related to the facts laid out in the main text.<sup>50</sup> They are anonymous and allegedly written by a witness from Abbeville. The “Extrait d’une lettre d’Abbeville, du 7 juillet 1766”<sup>51</sup> focuses on the rumours and intrigues at the root of La Barre’s accusation. It takes the form of a truncated letter and has neither addressee, nor signature. The author claims that he happened to be passing through Abbeville when La Barre returned from Paris to be executed: “je me trouvai samedi à Abbeville où une petite affaire m’avait conduit.”<sup>52</sup> The report is written in short sentences and contains a list of the many people involved in the case. The second excerpt, entitled “autre extrait” by Voltaire, discusses the sentence, the execution and the books—among them, Voltaire’s *Dictionnaire*—that were burnt together with La Barre’s body.<sup>53</sup> The third excerpt, also entitled “autre extrait,” describes La Barre’s personality and courage from the point of view of a witness to the execution. He was, we are told, an intelligent young man who might have had a promising future if he had not forgotten to take off his hat: “mort dans les plus horribles supplices pour avoir chanté des chansons et pour n’avoir pas oté son chapeau.”<sup>54</sup>

These three “extraits” contain in condensed form the plea for retrial which is at the heart of the *Relation*. The third, with its stress on the absurd discrepancy between offence (a forgotten hat) and punishment (torture and execution), is written in the tone of regretful irony so common to Voltaire’s work.<sup>55</sup> A comparison of the excerpts with the text of *Relation* reveals that both genres use similar means

<sup>47</sup> Voltaire 2008b, on 539. See also Maestro 1942.

<sup>48</sup> “Voici, Monsieur, quelles sont les charges. Le 13 août 1765 six témoins déposent qu’ils ont vu passer trois jeunes gens à trente pas d’une procession, que les sieurs De La Barre et De Talonde avaient leur chapeau sur la tête [...]”; Voltaire 2008b, on 547.

<sup>49</sup> See Porret and Salvi 2015.

<sup>50</sup> Voltaire 2008b, on 573.

<sup>51</sup> Voltaire 2008b, on 575.

<sup>52</sup> Voltaire 2008b, on 578.

<sup>53</sup> Voltaire 2008b, on 579.

<sup>54</sup> Voltaire 2008b, on 581.

<sup>55</sup> Hersant 2015, on 12.

to plead for retrial. At the same time, however, the excerpts (which include quotations, facts, details of the trial and names of witnesses) are closer to the official documents and stylistically simpler.

As well as being a plea for retrial, the *Relation* was also a plea for the moral rehabilitation of La Barre. *Le Cri du sang innocent*<sup>56</sup> concentrates on the second convict, d'Etallonde, who was sentenced to death *in absentia* after fleeing to Prussia.<sup>57</sup> After years of the status quo, Voltaire tried once more to obtain retrial and gain authorisation for d'Etallonde's return to France. Together with several other *hommes de lettres*, including Condorcet, he drew up plans to persuade the King's Counsel to reopen the dossier. His *Correspondence* of 1774/75 testifies to his changing strategies. Voltaire's first plan was to take legal steps to obtain a fair retrial,<sup>58</sup> but he soon lost confidence in such an official approach and came up with a second plan: he would mobilise public opinion by means of a "mémoire" in which the convict himself would make the case for his innocence in a "récit simple de la vérité."<sup>59</sup> In the end, however, he opted for a third strategy—that of asking the newly crowned king, Louis XVI for royal grace.<sup>60</sup> Voltaire and his fellow correspondents saw this third option as slightly humiliating, as it meant acting the suppliant to the absolute monarch. It was a last resort and, as the title – *Le Cri* – suggests, it was an act of despair.

Like many of Voltaire's polemical works, *Le Cri du sang innocent* makes use of a fictional author. The official request for royal grace is allegedly signed by the convicted man and sent from the Prussian province of Neuchâtel: "D'Etallonde, A Neufchâtel, ce 30 juin 1775: Au roi très chrétien, en son conseil, Sire!"<sup>61</sup> The title of the letter evokes the "sanguis innocens," the innocent blood of the martyrs that is mentioned in the New Testament.<sup>62</sup>

In Voltaire's *Œuvres Complètes*, *Le Cri du sang innocent* is accompanied by two documents posing as excerpts from the trial. As in the case of Chevalier, Voltaire assumes the role of a defence lawyer—this time to examine the charges brought against d'Etallonde.<sup>63</sup> In a letter to Condorcet dated December 1774, he informs him that he has received the minutes of the lengthy legal proceedings: "j'ai entre

<sup>56</sup> Voltaire 2014.

<sup>57</sup> Voltaire 2014, on 219–223 (on the context).

<sup>58</sup> See Speranskaja 2017, on 220–221.

<sup>59</sup> "Le jeune-homme [...] fera son mémoire lui-même. Il ne parlera point comme les avocats éloquentes qui invoquent une loi et un témoignage, qui apportent des raisons victorieuses, mais il convaincra par le récit de la simple vérité qui a été jusqu'ici ignorée." Voltaire to d'Argental, 18 March 1775 (D19377), in Voltaire 1968–1977 (1975), vol. 125. Such a memoir, written under the name of d'Etallonde, existed. It was sent by Voltaire to Frederick II of Prussia, but seems to have disappeared in World War II. See Voltaire 2014, on 229.

<sup>60</sup> Voltaire 2014, on 230.

<sup>61</sup> Voltaire 2014, on 279.

<sup>62</sup> In Voltaire's letters this biblical reference recurs frequently in connection with legal cases. He ends his letters with the exclamation: "ce sang innocent crie [...] et moi je crie aussi, je crierai jusqu'à ma mort!" Voltaire to Chastellux, 14 April 1775, in Voltaire 1968–1977. See also Robert Grandroute in his "Introduction" to Voltaire 2014, on 233. But also: "Je veux crier la vérité à plein gosier ; je veux faire retentir le nom du chevalier de La Barre à Paris et à Moscou; je veux ramener les hommes à l'amour de l'humanité par l'horreur de la barbarie." Voltaire to Gabriel Cramer, June 1768 (D14678), in Voltaire 1968–1977.

<sup>63</sup> Voltaire 2014, on 239.

les mains la procédure.”<sup>64</sup> The first document published with *Le Cri* is a summary of these proceedings based on the testimonies that led to d’Etallonde’s conviction and entitled “Précis de la procédure d’Abbeville.”<sup>65</sup> This document, addressed to the king and signed by the convicted d’Etallonde, consists of facts, events and statements recorded in chronological order. In his request for royal grace, the author claims to have read the entire proceedings—six thousand pages of confused text, far beyond the grasp of the Parisian judges.<sup>66</sup> While purporting to be an orderly and accurate summary of the trial, the “Précis” is in fact twenty pages of carefully selected quotations emphasising the uncertainties and rumours surrounding the case, and the incoherencies and absurdities of the charges brought against the convicted man.<sup>67</sup>

The second document, the “Résumé du procès-verbal d’Abbeville avec les réponses,” is a summary of the minutes of the trial, this time commented on by Voltaire himself in the form of a dialogue. Several copies were made and sent to people involved in d’Etallonde’s case. One manuscript has survived and is available at the Institut et Musée Voltaire (IMV). Written in two hands, the document is divided down the middle by a vertical line with the summary on the left and the annotations on the right under the heading: “Notes de la main de M. de Voltaire.”<sup>68</sup> The headings and summary are probably the work of one of Voltaire’s secretaries, but the comments and some of the interventions in the margins are in Voltaire’s own hand. His annotations are targeted refutations of the “facts” given and statements made during the trial. They expose the absurdities and contradictions of the testimonies that led to the conviction, point to the invalidity of allegations based on hearsay and rumours, and underline the legal absurdity of bringing charges against young men for singing songs on the streets of a provincial town.

## 5. Excerpts as Ostensible Notes

In the case of La Barre, excerpts were not only a way of gathering, organising and administrating knowledge; they were also political instruments. In a letter to Condorcet, Voltaire is explicit about the use he makes of them:

Le voicy enfin cet exécrationnel procez-verbal; le voicy avec toutes ses contradictions, ses imbécillités et ses noirceurs accumulées par une cabale d’Hotentots welches. [...] J’envoie aux deux Bertrands *l’extrait fidèle des dépositions avec la réfutation en marge*.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Voltaire to Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, marquis de Condorcet, 11 December 1774 (D 19228), in Voltaire 1968–1977 (1975), vol. 125, on 240.

<sup>65</sup> Voltaire 2014, 301–335.

<sup>66</sup> “On ne croira pas cet excès d’absurde calomnie, je ne la crois pas moi-même; cependant, je la lis dans les copies des pièces qu’on m’a remises entre les mains”; Voltaire 2014, on 287.

<sup>67</sup> “Le sieur Aliamet dépose avoir oui dire qu’un nommé Beauvardet avait dit, que le sieur d’Etallonde avait dit [...]”; Voltaire 2014, on 302.

<sup>68</sup> In his correction of Frederic the Great’s poem *L’Art de la Guerre*, Voltaire used a similar way of commenting and correcting a text. The manuscript of his correction is still available at the *Geheime Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz (GStA PK)* in Berlin. On this work, see Friedrich der Große 2012, on 606–607.

<sup>69</sup> Voltaire to Condorcet, 11 December 1774 (D 19228), in Voltaire 1968–1977 (1975), vol. 125, on 24 (emphasis added).

These sentences make clear the dialogical nature of the excerpts—the way in which they call upon the reader to respond. Voltaire uses them to sum up the trial and refute the accusation, and then distributes his summary and refutation to a large audience through a network of correspondents in Paris. His “extraits,” “précis,” “notes” and “résumés” do not comply with the rules of privacy usually associated with the practice of excerpting. In the recently developed taxonomy surrounding the *Corpus des notes marginales*, the genre could be defined as an “ostensible” note—“ostensible” in the sense of “apparent,” but also “alleged.” Voltaire’s excerpts serve as response or retaliation to the injustice done to La Barre and his companions. They are also a means of communicating his scrupulous reading of the sources and the authenticity of his work. If Voltaire usually tended to obscure and erase the intermediary steps between reading and writing, he has a different aim here, making no secret of his work on the sources. His excerpts are destined from the outset to be distributed to a wide public; they are part of a clear communication strategy.<sup>70</sup> From his relatively isolated position on the edge of the Kingdom of France, Voltaire strongly relied on clandestine manuscripts and a network of correspondents to distribute them.<sup>71</sup> There is a parallel between the excerpts and the annotations he made in his books:<sup>72</sup> far from revealing the “genuine,” spontaneous Voltaire, reading privately for his own purposes, both genres were instrumental in his fight for justice.<sup>73</sup>

In the history of scholarly practice since the Renaissance, Voltaire stands out for his critical attitude towards the “compilateurs,” defining himself in opposition to them as a dignified author, modern and “enlightened.” Yet at the end of his life, in the context of his fight to rehabilitate justice, he promotes the “extraits” as an additional genre in an oeuvre that already ranges from tragedy to poetry, from philosophical essay to historiography, from comedy to *conte philosophique*. Voltaire reinvents the “extrait,” turning it into a weapon in his political fight.

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<sup>70</sup> This neologism refers to a discussion on the status of these types of marginalia for Voltaire’s work. There are *grosso modo* two ways of approaching them: as rough drafts made for his own use which allow us, his critics, to see the true Voltaire at work, as proposed by Vercruysse 1970, or as a dialogical work, as suggested by Mervaud 2003.

<sup>71</sup> See Mervaud 1994b.

<sup>72</sup> See Paillard 2013.

<sup>73</sup> See, for instance, Mervaud and Seth 2004.

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